

EDITORIAL

Moratorium on carrying out death penalty is long overdue

The federal execution of Oklahoma City mass bomber Timothy McVeigh has once more reignited debate about capital punishment. Even opponents of the death penalty had a hard time trying to argue why McVeigh should have been kept alive.

This is a man who cold-bloodedly exploded a massive bomb out a federal building in Oklahoma City, Okla., killing 168 people, including children. He was chillingly remorseless, hailing his terroristic actions as a blow against the U.S. Government and referring to the children killed as "collateral damage." He was unapologetic about the killings and the misery he caused. He also invited execution, eschewing

appeals and positioning himself for martyrdom among the country's lunatic fringe.

McVeigh's crime was dastardly, disgusting and reprehensible. His death silenced a seemingly conscienceless man. There are some who argue that keeping him alive, under a life sentence without the possibility of parole would have been more fitting punishment because every day, he would have been reminded of his crimes. And he would have known that he would never get out of prison alive.

Even more important, however, is the question of whether the death penalty is an appropriate punishment. Should the state have the right to decide whether someone lives or dies.

That is an awesome power, one that is irreversible. Just before the execution, the U.S. Justice Department issued a report purporting to shew that there was no discrimination or racial bias in the way capital punishment is administered in the United States of America.

May be there isn't. And then again, maybe there is. We do know that African Americans are disproportionately represented, based on their population ratios, in the country's criminal justice system. We also know that poor people, African Americans and Hispanic Americans are more likely to be sentenced to death than other groups. That is disturbing.

Recently states,

including our neighbor Illinois, have imposed a moratorium on the carrying out of the death penalty. Other states, led by Texas, have continued to carry out executions.

We applaud those states that have stopped carrying out death sentences, until studies are completed. The Illinois action came after investigation by journalism students showed that a number of death row inmates were innocent, including some who came perilously close to being executed. A number of other people across the country have been freed based on new DNA evidence.

The death penalty is final. When someone is executed, there is no other recourse. Even if exculpatory evidence comes out late, it will be too late to save the person who has been executed. That should force us to stop and think about that kind of penalty.

We feel very strongly that all states should consider a moratorium on carrying out the death penalty. We feel there should be a comprehensive study, by

a high-powered group of prominent, disinterested citizens to take a hard look at capital punishment and how it is administered or maladministered.

We are not satisfied that capital punishment has been dispensed fairly across this country. It seems that the poor, Hispanics and African Americans are more likely to be sentenced to death because they cannot afford high-powered legal counsel. Many such people tend to rely too often on overworked and underpaid public defenders.

On the other hand, those who are able to afford good lawyers, who work hard for their fees and are willing or able to plea bargain with prosecutors, seem more likely to escape capital punishment. Under these conditions we feel life without parole should be an appropriate punishment, until there has been a thorough investigation of capital punishment by all interested parties, including the American Bar Association.

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